

**Interview with Michael Collier  
Conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the  
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective  
Observed by Linda Byrne**

Today is January 18, 2008, and we are here talking with Michael Collier. Linda Byrne is with me; Sue Kovach Shuman and we are looking at the Providence District for the Providence Perspective History project. Mr. Collier would you tell us a little bit about what your title is; you are with Uniwest and?

**Michael:** Yes, I am the President of Uniwest. Uniwest is a company that has several different entities, operating companies. Uniwest Construction, Inc. which is a commercial general contracting company; we have Uniwest Commercial Realty which is a full service commercial brokerage and property management company, and we have Uniwest Development which is the development company and we do primarily commercial property some residential but mostly commercial.

**Sue:** And Uniwest has been located in Merrifield since 1995?

**Michael:** 1995, is that correct?

**Sue:** Yes, June of 1995, I looked on the website. Why did you pick Merrifield to locate your company? Did you grow up in this area?

**Michael:** No, neither my partner nor I grew up in Northern Virginia, but we have operated our business, prior to this, in the Bailey's Crossroads area near Skyline and we were looking for a central location. We liked the Merrifield area both in terms of its central location to the Beltway and as well as our future home because we had also acquired some property early in the 1990's that we were in the process of rezoning and looking to develop.

**Sue:** Property here?

**Michael:** Property here in Merrifield so we moved our offices here.

**Sue:** Is Bailey's part of this District.

**Linda:** No.

**Sue:** What kind of research did you do on Vantage building now, the actual land? Not just title searches and such and what was there before, but how far back can you find out what was on that land before?

**Michael:** Well, I would have to myself look back to see perhaps what was there years and years ago, but the area where our office is today and was when we first moved to Merrifield we built the building the office is in, but we also developed several properties right around us. At that same time and that area was comprised of a construction company, equipment and catch all yard, a towing company yard a mulch pile, and an old warehouse building so it was an assemblage of a number of different parcels all generally undeveloped except for the one warehouse building.

**Sue:** So you bought land from each of these individual property owners?

**Michael:** Yes.

**Sue:** To put together the project on which you are working now?

**Michael:** Well no, not for the project we are developing now. The property that we developed previously, which now has the NAFA office building, Life Insurance Association, our office building, The Homeward Suites Hotel and the Silver Diner at the corner of Gallows and Porter. So we assembled all of that property in the early 90's, and developed, rezoned and redeveloped all that property.

**Sue:** Generally then you think this area is a good business environment for development at this point? The zoning has been approved and there is a plan on the books for the entire Merrifield area with the Metro and such. So that entire package is what you feel is conducive to future development, right?

**Michael:** I do, but to go back to when we first moved here there was no new development really going on, not very much of it.

**Sue:** Tell us what was really here, those warehouses and other things.

**Michael:** Just similar to what you see back off the roads tucked in little corners and nooks and crannies now of landscaping yards, mulching yards, and towing companies and construction equipment places. It was as Northern Virginia has developed there is less and less industrial property. This is one of the last bastions on the beltway where these properties were and yet you had INOVA Fairfax Hospital and some of the new office buildings and of course Mobile and Exxon's Headquarters and of course Fairview Park on the south end and the Restaurant Park, which is not new now, but it was then. On the north end you had the Metro and some redevelopment going on at the Metro and so you had the bar of the two bar bells in-between Gallows Road, which was completely undeveloped. We thought back 17 or 18 years ago that it would be the right time that this property was going to be redeveloped. Our property was the first one in between the Metro and south of Rt. 50 to get developed and since then things have been kind of continuing to pick up steam.

**Sue:** What we are talking about goes back 20 years. Do you have any information about anything before the 20 years, what was in this area or what the environment would have been like?

**Michael:** Again, it was mostly industrial and contactor's yards for quite some time and that is what this area was known for. But, going way back a little bit of interesting history we were neighbors to the Merrifield Baptist Church; we discussed with them and they discussed with us, over the years, acquiring their property. Of course they had found it difficult to find a larger parcel of land in this close proximity and we had talked to them about moving out further, but their trustees and congregation really want to retain that building and would like to obtain a location in this immediate area because this was a large black area of African Americans that had a real community here. So, I have it in my files because I did some research when we first moved in and started redeveloping this area. There are some great stories over this history of this African American community interfacing with the surrounding white community, really great stories.

**Sue:** Your source of these stories was who?

**Michael:** Gosh, I would have to look back and see but there were books in the library prior to Reverend Kitchen of the Merrifield Baptist Church, the pastor was Graham, I have to recollect his name, a great guy. (Later remembered the name of Rev. Linwood Graham.)

**Sue:** We would appreciate any contact like that.

**Michael:** Well he has since passed away and Reverend Kitchen has moved to a different church but nonetheless he had some information he made available.

**Sue:** Where exactly is Merrifield Baptist Church?

**Michael:** Right at the SE corner of Gallows Road and Porter Road, right across from our new project the Vantage, which is where the Silver Diner is on one corner right behind the Crown Gas Station.

**Sue:** I know where the Silver Diner is so the church is right in there; so all these years of living here I did not quite notice it. What you are saying is that your company would like to somehow acquire that land to do a project to continue?

**Michael:** No, no we had talked to them off and on over the years and they had talked to us to see if whether or not we would be interested in buying their property and we had expressed an interest too, when we were acquiring other properties. That may, at some point come to pass, but right now there are no active conversations about that.

But I had just mentioned that some of the old businesses have gone away. But there is still Merrifield Garden's Center, which is an institution everybody recognizes Merrifield by Merrifield's Garden Center, but then you also have Merrifield Baptist Church and there are also other thriving business' here that may not be on Gallows Road or right on Lee Highway, which are still a great part of the community and have been for years and years.

**Sue:** So what kind of old businesses besides Merrifield Gardens Center are you talking about?

**Michael:** Well again, if you just get off of Gallows Road, Lee Highway, again some of the major arterials and get back into some of the business parks and other areas, there are a lot of businesses and small business that have been here and continue to be here, such as Craven Tires and a lot of folks.

**Linda:** I would like to know a little more about your current project.

**Michael:** Okay, great. Our current project which I said before we started the recording is really at the threshold of opening and what has been a long redevelopment process. The project is two buildings, right on Gallows Road and intersected by Strawberry Lane, which is a signalized section by Gallows Road and leading into the current National Amusements Theater. Our project consists of two buildings, both eight-story buildings with 105,000 square feet of retail, office space and 270 residential units. It is ready to open; we are at the final stages of it with exception of little 2400 square foot space. The commercial and retail is all leased up and should offer, I think, some great new amenities for the area. Besides the big gym, we have a number of different restaurants, a Citibank is opening a location there and we have some service tenants too, Fed Ex and Kinko's and there will be a hair salon and a jewelry store and there will be a Cold Stone Creamery, which will be a treat after you work out.

**Sue:** What kind of public transportation will there be to the Metro from?

**Michael:** From our project? Besides what is existing in terms of public bus service today we have employed a van service. A bus service will be providing shuttle service to and from the Metro both during the morning peak hour times as well as the afternoon and evening peak hour times.

**Sue:** Will this be for the residents there?

**Michael:** Residents, commercial, people coming to shop and residents alike.

**Sue:** And your company would maintain that?

**Michael:** Yes, and our proffer condition for our project allows for that to be terminated and make a contribution and participate in a larger bus should that

come to pass, which I hope someday does. That would be a broader shuttle bus service. Right now, there are different independent shuttles that

run from hotels or hospitals and INOVA's building. There are a number of them, I don't know them all.

But it would be and there are those that will always continue to have certain private ones, which is fine and is a good thing. As other developments come on line I think it would be advantageous to have a shuttle service that would serve this corridor between the (Merrifield) Towne Center and the Metro and circulate and probably run longer hours. I think it will eventually come to pass.

**Sue:** That is the kind of thing that your company would make a contribution towards?

**Michael:** Yes.

**Sue:** What is the time frame right now that you are thinking of for providing that shuttle service, how many years from when people start living there in the condo's?

**Michael:** For our own?

**Sue:** Yes, for your own.

**Michael:** Immediately!

**Sue:** But how many years do you think you would have to do that before perhaps?

**Michael:** It's a good question, right now I don't know. Right now, of course, the theater property which Eden's and Avant just obtained their rezoning approvals for 27 acres a couple of million square feet of mixed use development. A big chunk of that will be multi-family residential. There are other projects along Gallows Road north of Lee Highway towards the Metro; we are beginning to close that gap end of redevelopment. So certainly as those come on line, whatever

their time frame is, then I think that will be the time that there might be a critical mass enough to give

**Sue:** Don't keep hedging here on giving a time frame. Could be a long time, I guess.

**Michael:** Those are out of my control, but I would think 2010, of 2011 which would hopefully coincide with the road improvements.

**Sue:** Are the condo units all leased or all sold or mixed?

**Michael:** Ours, in our current project?

**Sue:** In your current project.

**Michael:** They are all sold.

**Sue:** Have they been all sold?

**Michael:** They have been all sold. We have actually been awarded from an organization that tracks all of these sales of multi family projects, an award in 2005 when we went to market and were selling out faster than any project in the metropolitan area.

**Sue:** So we can have the time frame in the Perspective history what are the price range of these condos?

**Michael:** It is a real broad price range because we have a variety of different sizes, views, floors and whatever.

**Sue:** It is going to be different 100 years from now so we need some price range so we can put it in the history

**Michael:** We have a broad range from low of \$300,000 to almost or a million dollars.

**Sue:** For a condo unit?

**Michael:** Yes, which is a big penthouse unit. So it is really a wide, wide range of types of units, which is good. But, even though they have all been sold the residential market, mortgage market has changed dramatically so having them sold and having people actually being able to settle and move in are two different things. So that has been kind of a challenge currently.

**Linda:** One of the things I wanted to get back to, you said that you looked at this area as a place that was close to the beltway and easy to get into and out of. In an earlier interview with Lloyd Wineland, whose father started a chain of movie theaters here in the 40's, 50's and so forth, when the beltway was built their philosophy was build a theater at each **(Michael: major exit of the beltway?)**, exactly. I see that you continue to use that philosophy for the types of things that you are doing. What do you see happening as those nodes become overloaded, or can they become overloaded?

**Michael:** I think they can become overloaded. But I think there is a lot of capacity, assuming the Metro maintains and grows with the demand. When we first looked here there wasn't really the focus seventeen, eighteen years ago, there wasn't this focus, certainly in Northern Virginia about Metro and more urban dense development. When we got our property rezoned at a 1.2 F.A.R that was pretty dense for Northern Virginia, I mean outside of Arlington County and now of course with Tyson's and other metros you are talking about 3 and 4 F.A.R's and so forth, a much higher density.

It has been a dramatic shift over these last fifteen to twenty years in terms of land planning and land use. Now one of the build philosophies or one of the philosophies of development, certainly there has been development all over suburban as well as urban. The reason we liked Merrifield, as I was talking about earlier, is because it is close and right off the beltway, Rt. 50 and Rt. 29 and Gallows Road, a large transportation network and again, some under utilized property in the area, which was also not that, available. So that is what first attracted us here. Now to continue to develop this second project which is Vantage which is just opening and moving in and relocating our office into that building and staying here and saying that we are going to be staying here for a



while. It has been what now is today smart growth but, everybody has different titles for it. The concentration of more dense development at the Metro areas has made public transportation more available. Certainly the amount of traffic has made things very difficult in Northern Virginia.

**Linda:** How have you found working with local government, specifically Supervisor Smyth in the Providence District and with this the idea of the smart growth in the future?

**Michael:** I found that there is an endorsement of that philosophy of concentration of development at or near the Metro and I happened to concur with that but I think that there are limits to that as well. I think there needs to be reasonable constraints to that in terms of phasing and timing so that the development doesn't get ahead of the transportation. But, what my perception is, rightly or wrongly, I think that this next generation coming behind me and certainly behind the younger folks is that this area is the capital of the world and it is going to continue to grow and it will become continually more diverse either through lifestyle or just growing up in a different way. More people, that are from the outside of the United States and are more accustomed to living in condominium, multi-story, multi-family type of homes and the community using public transportation and having urban parks and mixed use types of environment close by - more city living - that is going to be it. There is going to be the economic factors that is going to make it more difficult with people living close in, to buy single family homes with a nice big yard, and that is going to be more difficult to do.

**Sue:** Can you picture yourself living here at the Vantage?

**Michael:** Oh sure. Yes, at some point and stage.

**Sue:** What point and stage would that need to be?

**Michael:** If I had probably young kids at home, I have teenagers now but I think that this style of living is either for young folks that have no kids or small kids, or singles or older people that are buying down but still want to live and work in the area and stay in the area.

Our buyer mix is very much that way, we have a large Asian population of buyers, and we have young single or married couples that do not have kids that are professionals. Their whole perspective, like my 25 year old son, he didn't want a yard, he didn't want to mow he didn't want it. He loves urban living, he lives in Charlotte, NC now but before he lived in an apartment in Roslyn, Ballston corridor of Clarendon area and that was the lifestyle he wanted, he wasn't interested in a yard.

**Sue:** As you were saying as the people start living near more public transportation in the city and as part of the equation families also will perhaps be moving to places like the Vantage as you have all the retail and public transportation there wouldn't be any reason for them not to.

**Michael:** Not at all and I think that is the beginning as the demographics change that this will be very much an acceptable lifestyle and one they are accustom to.

**Sue:** I am not making a real analogy to Reston, but Reston Center kind of started out the same way, I think, with younger people and families, but of course that has changed and not just singles, but everybody lives there now. It is growing and do you think that is going to happen here in Merrifield?

**Michael:** I absolutely think so, and again I think maybe it will adapt more quickly because of the ethnic mix closer in and around the beltway than further out than Reston. So, I think that again it is what you are accustom to and you are very comfortable with that kind of living

**Sue:** So your company is developing in this area in Merrifield and I know there is a grand plan for Merrifield with other things. The minor league ballpark, I know a few years ago was proposed and that didn't get approved, are there any other commercial, not commercial, but public community type of things that you are considering that would work for Merrifield?

**Michael:** There are not to my knowledge. I think in some respects the Towne Center development becomes a community in public a component. I think maybe a ball park would be a central one item; this is creating a community I think. If you want to make the analogy of maybe Clarendon or Reston. I think a lot of

people think of that as a broader community. A place to go, be and spend time and have activities within that are open to the public whether it be concerts or community fairs or whatever it is. That is something that Merrifield has not had previously.

**Sue:** Will there be such a concert or conference facility at the Vantage or something forth coming?

**Michael:** We have a park with a, it is an urban park but that would be a place that is open to the public and people could come. How it is to accommodate large gatherings, it is not a venue for that, but there is a little stage where you can have a little Blue Grass Festival or be a part of the Merrifield Fair or something, it could certainly be used for that. But as the rest of the Towne Center is developed there is envisioned, I know by the developers as well as the community that venues for that will be provided.

**Linda:** How do you feel that local government has done their job in promoting this area, the development of and what is needed to be done?

**Michael:** I think they have done a, going back even before Linda Smyth to Gerry Connolly, he had been very supportive of the redevelopment, of our redevelopment. This was a long challenging process to get through, but nonetheless I think he shared way back then, the vision that development is going to happen and if it is positive redevelopment, which we felt like ours were. Our new project was an old closed down gas station, an auto repair place, a vacant weeds growing up all over forty year old gravel and asphalt that once before had been a contractors yard and a U Haul rental garage, so it wasn't very attractive. I think that he and Linda at the time was the Planning Commissioner. I think they both at the time, envisioned that this was going to come and if it was positive in the right development and redevelopment of some of these older properties that were not providing jobs, taxes and certainly not providing any visual attraction to the area, but probably a detriment that this was a positive thing to the extent that we as the developer could present a project that was well designed and well founded and could solicit and obtain citizen and community business support, which we did for our projects on both sides of the road. So I think they were seeing that for this area and were supportive of it. At the same time they were

also very clear that we did meet to explain our project and have it endorsed by the community. Which is what it should be.

**Linda:** Well, having looked at the plans I think the project is very exciting and it is gorgeous.

**Michael:** Thank you, I am happy the way it is finishing up and is coming together.

**Sue:** When does the actual first resident move in to the Vantage?

**Michael:** It should be the second week of February, in just a couple of weeks. The units are ready to move into we just have a few inspections to get.

**Sue:** They are all ready?

**Michael:** In the south building they are. In the north building there are some that are and some are slowly getting finished.

**Sue:** That is very soon. Thank you. Linda, would you like to ask anything else?

**Linda:** Would you just briefly tell us about your background? Where you grew up and your family?

**Michael:** Yes but I am not sure it has a whole lot of relevance to Merrifield; but I grew up in Topeka, Kansas as did my business partner Norman Pozez and that is where we grew up actually all through college. We went to a variety of different schools, but my partner's family owned a business in Topeka, Kansas called Payless Shoe which became outside of Wal-Mart, the largest retail shoe store in the country and it was eventually purchased by the May Department Store. Norman moved out here a couple of years before I moved here and we started UniWest, in 1986. So, both of our backgrounds are in retail and real estate and development and construction. That is what our backgrounds have always been even related to the retail business itself, it was more in the development of real estate and construction sides of the business. We both at a fairly young age decided to forego the corporate world and venture out on our own so that is what we did in 1986.

**Sue:** And you raised your family in this area?

**Michael:** Yes, my partner still lives in D.C. and my wife and I lived in D.C. and move to McLean fifteen or sixteen years ago. So this to Merrifield is a very convenient commute.

**Linda:** One last thing. Could you tell us where you are going to move on in the future with your next project or is that something you don't want to share at this point?

**Michael:** Well, we have a number of projects that we are active in today and that we are pursuing in other areas outside of Merrifield. In Merrifield specifically we also own what's referred to as the old Levitt's Building right next to contiguous to our Vantage project.

**Sue:** Where the unique furniture store is?

**Michael:** Yes connected to Fairfax Plaza and that piece. So certainly we think that property is ripe for redevelopment and we have no immediate plans to redevelop it at this point. We are just finishing this project, the Vantage, first phase and of course with the theater property redevelopment, which will be pretty substantial, we have to also watch that one go through the process and that is certainly ahead of anything we will do with ours. Now that that plan is in place we will watch that plan unfold into the types of uses and see how we will integrate it with ours into the overall project. We certainly plan on redeveloping it but I am not sure what the timing would be right now because there are a lot of conditions that would plan into that.

**Linda:** Great and thank you very much.